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A conversation with Mike Wallace

Wouldn't you like to see "60 Minutes" reporter Mike Wallace interview himself about the program's bungled attack on the tobacco industry? There he is, perspiring under the klieg lights and a barrage of loaded questions, knowing that no matter how he answers, he is no match for editors who will splice and cut the tape to make him look as stupid and guilty as possible.

Just imagine: "Mr. Wallace, you blamed lawsuit-wielding industry lawyers for killing a hard-hitting portion of your hit piece on tobacco companies. But isn't it true that you promised a key source for the story that you would never show it without his permission, which he never gave? Isn't it true that this impartial, objective source was, in fact, a paid consultant to the program? And isn't it also true that you had to agree to indemnify him against any libel suit resulting from airing the program? Notwithstanding the almost impossibly high standard for proving libel, your source apparently wasn't very confident his story could survive a court test. Have your standards fallen so low, in effect, that you are now, in effect, buying stories like some supermarket tabloid?" Tick, tick, tick.

The irony of it all is that the program focused on how the industry limits the kind of information that reaches the public about its products. In particular, "60 Minutes" was interested in an allegation that the industry had once tried to manufacture a cigarette without the health risks associated with the existing brands, then quietly abandoned the project. In the end, however, the real story quickly turned into controversy over the program's attempts to hide the unusual, if not unprecedented, deals cut with its unidentified source, apparently a former tobacco industry official.

More troubles for the program followed. Someone inside "60 Minutes" leaked the name of the source to the press in an attempt to bolster the credibility of the original attack on the industry and to embarrass CBS lawyers who decided against it. Thus, reporters who might piously have gone to jail rather than reveal the name of a source now give it up in the name of office politics. Expect sources to take a second look at their dealings with CBS.

This debacle is only the latest in a series of setbacks for anti-tobacco forces ranging from media outlets to government agencies. There are lots of explanations, not the least of which is that the companies have the resources with which to defend themselves. But tobacco foes also have a habit of lowering the bar when it comes to measuring their evidence against the industry, and their credibility suffers as a result. High hurdles are there for a reason.

In the case of "60 Minutes," the program resorted to National Enquirer-like tactics to get its information, then tried to cover them up. (Apologies to anyone at the National Enquirer offended by that comparison.) When ABC's "Day One" accused the industry of "spiking" its cigarettes with nicotine, it did so based on a misunderstanding of the manufacturing process so profound as to flunk Reporting 101.

The Environmental Protection Agency produced a report linking second-hand smoke to 3,000 lung-cancer deaths among non-smokers, findings that the Congressional Research Service this month said were "plagued" with errors. ("It is clear that misclassification and recall bias plague ETS epidemiology studies.") States seek reimbursement for services rendered to persons suffering from tobacco-related health problems, a principle they wouldn't dream of applying to less politically incorrect but nonetheless potentially dangerous products. Medical personnel publish studies purporting to tie advertising to youth smoking, a subject better left to advertising experts. Political advocates pass off studies on tobacco campaign contributions as medical research.

Smoking is a risky proposition, a finding which the industry itself does not dispute. But because many Americans have so far declined to give up the habit and lead the kind of wholesome life recommended by the anointed, the latter have resorted to increasingly desperate tactics to persuade them. But as Mr. Wallace discovered, the tactics end up highlighting the weakness of their arguments. The spectacle may be unintentionally comical, but it is no service to Americans trying to sort out real health risks from the fake.

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